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### Opening hearts, home Adoption Day highlights parents' commitment

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**BY LIZ COBBS**

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Tila Havlik bounced through the front door with a spring in her step. She had just come home from Huron High School.

Tila (pronounced Tee-la) approached her mother, Lynne Havlik, who was sitting on the couch. Her father, David Havlik, sat in a chair nearby. A fire crackled in the fireplace of their cozy living room in their Ann Arbor Township home.

"Mom, can I use your computer for a report?" asked 15-year-old Tila, wearing headphones and holding a CD player in her hand. "I have to write about Paris." Her mother gave her approval.

The Havliks were foster parents in 1990 when 5-week-old Tila was placed in their home. She had been diagnosed with a kidney-based illness and needed 24-hour medical care.

"They told us not to make an emotional investment in her because she probably wouldn't live past 3 years old," said Lynne, a nurse by profession. David Havlik is a self-employed mason.

Tila surprised them all and survived. When she was 2, the Havliks, who already had four biological children, adopted her. Tila would be the first of seven special needs children the Havliks would adopt over the next 15 years.

On Tuesday, David and Lynne Havlik gave moral support to and briefly shared their story with other adoptive families during the third annual Michigan Adoption Day at Washtenaw County Circuit Court.

Washtenaw was among 40 Michigan counties participating, making it the largest Adoption Day in the country for the third year in a row, according to the Michigan Department of Human Services and the Michigan Supreme Court, which cosponsored the annual adoption event.

Locally, eight families finalized adoptions. Statewide, more than 270 adoptions were finalized Tuesday, meaning those families had the "courage to tell children, 'Yes, I want you in my life, I want you to be my child,'" said Michigan Court of Appeals Judge Kurtis T. Wilder, at a reception for adoptive families in Washtenaw County.

The DHS comes into a family's life during times of crisis, but having a day like Adoption Day is when the "best of human nature" is seen, it's when "you see the commitments that adults have made to our children," said DHS Director Marianne Udow, who also spoke at the reception.

According to human services figures, 2,684 adoptions were finalized through DHS offices and private adoption agencies during fiscal year 2004, an increase over 2003, when 2,469 adoptions were finalized. Of the total number of adoptions in 2004, 93 percent of the children were adopted by a relative or foster parent.

Washtenaw County's adoption specialist Monica Ireland-Hicks expects just under 120 adoptions this year.

Ireland-Hicks said she does not know why adoptions have declined over the past couple of years, but she has had prospective adoptive parents tell her they wanted to adopt children from overseas. The parents say they're less worried about a birth parent "showing up and knocking on their door wanting the child back or a loophole in the U.S. adoption process that might reverse the adoption."

Adoption specialists say older children, minority children and sibling groups are harder to place. Often, children have social, emotional or psychological needs, sometimes because of abuse and neglect that caused them to be taken out of their birth homes, specialists say.

Val Gaitskill, adoption specialist with HelpSource, the largest social service agency in Washtenaw County, said she tells prospective adoptive parents about a child's history, including how many foster care placements a child has been in, whether a child has a physical, emotional or mental health impairment and whether a child has siblings who also need to be adopted.

"If you share their past life experiences (to prospective adoptive parents), that seems to open their heart," Gaitskill said. "I look for people who open up their heart first before they open up their home."

Back at the Havliks' home, the couple said they first opened their doors in 1987 by becoming foster parents. They've fostered about 30 children and adopted seven with different special needs, who now range in age from 15 to 2. The couple, who also have two grandchildren, talk about the frustrating times and numerous problems they've had over the years, such as a child's health scare or an agency not wanting them to adopt a child because of race. The Havliks are white. Six of their children are black, one is biracial.

"With adoption in general, the question we're asked the most is 'why are you doing this?'" said David Havlik.

"I think that we're both purpose-driven, and we love what we do," Lynne Havlik answered.

Tila, sitting on an arm of the couch by her mother, said she's sometimes questioned by students at school about being adopted.

"Personally, I don't mind being adopted," said Tila, who also has contact with her birth family. "Sometimes you miss your (birth) family, but there's nothing wrong with being adopted by someone who loves you."

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